

KEN BURNS'S 1997 *LEWIS AND CLARK* TELEVISION DOCUMENTARY: AMERICAN HISTORY IN DETOX

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(Resumen)

Recientemente se ha venido prestando una gran atención al papel del cine y la televisión en la elaboración de la historia americana. El documental de 1997 de Ken Burns sobre la expedición de Lewis y Clark tampoco escapó la atención de la crítica y estudiosos. Mientras que algunos se centraron en temas de exactitud y responsabilidad, otros lo hicieron en como experimentamos, recordamos y participamos en la construcción del pasado. La puntualización de Patricia Limerick sobre lo que conduce el documental era la “necesidad de parábola” parece particularmente apropiada. ¿No se denomina a la Unidad del Descubrimiento “la encarnación de América”? o más aún , ¿no nos hacen creer que los americanos ahora mismo están anhelando la unidad nacional? O, finalmente, ¿no contó Ken Burns en *USA Today* que la historia es medicina? No tiene nada que ver con el pasado. Todo tiene que ver con el presente. Los comentarios de este tipo reflejan e influyen la necesidad americana de una venda que cubra las heridas infligidas por la “Guerra Civil” de los años 60, que incluye, por supuesto, Vietnam. El impacto del multiculturalismo ha llevado también a una gran preocupación por un consenso nacional. Como resultado existe una nostalgia generalizada hacia un pasado no problemático. Quizás esto explica, porque “Lewis and Clark” de Ken Burns rememora un capítulo clave incuestionable en la historia americana; también crea un consenso nacional imaginario con Meriwether Lewis y William Clark como sus significantes.

A great deal of attention has recently been paid to the role of film and television in the writing of American history. Ken Burns's 1997 documentary of the Lewis and Clark expedition also did not escape the attention of critics and scholars. While some focused on issues of accuracy and responsibility, others focused on how we come to experience, remember, and participate in constructing the past. Patricia Limerick's remark that what really drives the documentary was “the need for parable” seems particularly appropriate. Is not the Corps of Discovery called “the incarnation of America”? Or else, are we not made to believe that the “American people right now are yearning [...] for a sense of national unity”? Or, finally, did not Ken Burns say to *USA Today* that “history is medicine. It has nothing to do with the past. It has everything to do with the present.” Statements of this kind reflect (and influence) Americans' need for a band-aid to cover the wounds inflicted by the “Civil War” of the 1960s, which includes, of course, Vietnam. The impact of multiculturalism too has led to great unease concerning the national consensus. As a result, there is widespread nostalgia for a past that must necessarily appear non-problematic. Perhaps this explains why Burns's *Lewis and Clark*, which retraces an undisputed key chapter in American history, too creates an imaginary national consensus with Meriwether Lewis and William Clark as its signifiers.

This essay is about creations, in contemporary popular culture, of a *usable past* from the historic Lewis and Clark expedition. The expedition lasted from May 1804 until September 1806. The upcoming bicentennial, in 2005, is giving it both enormous publicity and special

significance. Already, national, state, and private planning committees are well underway in preparations for the celebrations. Tourist visitations to Lewis and Clark sites seem to be generally up also. In September 1997, construction began on a \$6 million Lewis and Clark museum in Great Falls, Montana, which has become a top attraction since its opening in July 1998. Visits to Fort Clatsop National Memorial, a reconstruction of the explorers' winter home, have doubled to 200,000 a year since the 1980s and were up again in 1997. In the Pacific Northwest, where the Corps of Discovery spent much of their journey, the *Portland Oregonian* has assigned a reporter to write Lewis and Clark stories full time. And the Lewis and Clark story even plays into the nation's relationships with Native American tribes. Native American displays at the new North Dakota Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center in Washburn, N.D., have helped draw some 16,000 people in the first three months after its opening, a staggering number for this sparsely populated region (Sloan 1D).

What has perhaps helped funnel the excitement about the Lewis and Clark story the most is a PBS documentary by Ken Burns. Titled *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery*, the documentary first went on air from Public Television stations in November 1997. A companion volume by Dayton Duncan and Burns was published the month before that. In the interest of space I thought I would deal mostly with Burns's film, though. We will see that in the film, which retraces what is undoubtedly a key chapter in American history, there is at one and the same time a diversity of sectional voices and an ever-new project of national unity. As a result, we go away from it having laced into an imaginary national consensus with Meriwether Lewis and William Clark as its signifiers. A good example of what is meant here is in the overture, some three minutes into the film and before the main title appears. What we see is a river scene in the last light of the afternoon. Appropriately, the boat is headed west, into the setting sun. And we see, in silhouette, the U.S. flag — more the idea of a flag than the thing itself, yet even that is too big to be missed.

Why did the film crew, whose declared intention was to bring back "a reality as close to the expedition's as was humanly possible" (xi), decide to use such an incredibly outsized flag, placing it so that in a strong wind it would surely have capsized the original keelboat, heavily loaded as it was according to the reports of the captains? Evidently, what is so prominently visible on the boat sailing into the "gentle breeze" is "Old Glory," the flag of God's own country. Of this flag, we learn from a recently published book titled *Along the Trail with Lewis and Clark*, the expedition carried an "unknown number in three sizes. A large one was flown over the Corps' forts and major camps. The rest were given to selected Indian leaders as emblems of peace, and to represent a bond of union between the tribe and the United States of America" (Fifer and Soderberg, inside front cover). In Burns's film, the keelboat-with-flag scene is followed by the narrator, Hal Holbrook, telling us that what we are getting is "a glimpse into the future of the young nation." As Elliott West, one of the fiercest critics of the Lewis and Clark documentary, argues, the reasons for the film's success go "beyond the story's universal appeal" to a "sense of nationhood" and, by the same token, to the Stars and Stripes, the most obvious emblem of American nationhood.

What we are concerned with is, then, the cultural surplus Ken Burns and his associates have produced with the help of the national emblem. I therefore propose that the size given to "Old Glory" in the film is not coincidental but is instead an index to its value as historical or cultural capital. That capital can be put to good use in national identity building. As I will try to show, foregrounding of one of the most sacred national emblems of the United States makes even better sense in the broader context of neo-nationalism or neo-patriotism which has, especially since the end of the Cold War, swept across the United States like

another Desert Storm. With the end of the Cold War has come a forceful return of "American" themes, both in culture (see films such as *Forrest Gump*, *Independence Day*, *Apollo 13*, *Air Force One*, *The Siege*, *Saving Private Ryan*, or the even more recent *The Patriot*) and in politics (as see the controversies between the U.S. administration and the European Union over the intervention in Kosovo or else, more recently, over the nomination of Horst Koehler, a German citizen, to the directorship of IMF, the International Monetary Fund).

The new assertiveness in American patriotism has undoubtedly alienated quite a few friends of the United States, especially in Europe, yet for a country that many commentators believe is in certain ways out of control — torn apart by culture wars, ethnic strife, drugs, guns, violence, and crime — the recent success story must appear like medicine. Take, for instance, Stephen Ambrose, who in his Preface to a 1998 National Geographic book about the Lewis and Clark voyage explains why the story of the Corps of Discovery has been a "never-ending source of delight" both for himself and for his family. The main reason, Ambrose's "special draw," is that the story "centers around the twin themes of heroism and national unity." He continues with a personal anecdote:

We began following Lewis and Clark in 1976, at a time when the national mood was cynicism, as Nixon had just resigned and Saigon had fallen and nobody wanted to hear about heroes and we as a people were threatening to tear ourselves apart. Patriotism was distinctly out of fashion, especially in the academic circles we lived in. We desperately wanted our children to grow up loving and appreciating our country, to realize that this empire of liberty we live in didn't just happen. Men made it happen, and we were determined to introduce our children to some of those who made our liberty and our continental scope possible, starting with Jefferson and Lewis and Clark. So we set out on a three-month camping trip to discover how they did it.

Two years before, in a genuinely scholarly book about the Lewis and Clark expedition (and a top-10 best-seller for more than a year, with sales at 700,000 in October, 1997, and rising), Ambrose had followed a similar design. As regards the 1976 camping trip, here is what the author recalls:

On July 4, we were at Lemhi Pass, with all the students and some friends. It was the most glorious night of our lives. You could reach out and touch the stars. Except for a logging road, the place was unchanged since Lewis was there. Around the campfire we took turns enumerating the reasons we loved our country [...] We sang patriotic songs. We indulged ourselves in an outpouring of patriotism. (13)

That was on July 4, 1976, the very day of the bicentennial of American independence! Since, Ambrose has been a regular on the Lewis and Clark Trail. On one of these occasions he was out with Dayton Duncan, Gary Moulton, and other Lewis and Clark notables. He has also met Ken Burns on various sites along the trail. Surely Ambrose has not been the only one to teach Burns — as one of his own 'children' — to love and appreciate his country. Yet the influence of this renowned historian and of what he stands for is undeniably felt in the film.

Burns's documentary, the result of some four to five years of dedicated labor, faces the same problems as other attempts to bring the past to the screen through visual images that have to be either static or irrelevant. We have shots of Monticello, Fort Clatsop, portraits (including portraits of Native Americans taken in the late nineteenth century), engravings and

paintings (by George Catlin, George Caleb Bingham, and others), landscape photographs, and drawings and sketches from the journals, and documents — but they are animated only by the camera's roving lens. They are interspersed among action shots of the keelboat, rivers flowing, suns rising, birds flying, and a few reenactments in dim light and dim focus, the faces obscure, of people pulling the keelboat, or portaging the Great Falls. What drives the series and holds it together is, however, not sight but sound, a spoken narrative to which the images and historic portraits are no more than background, like the music that accompanies them. It is an eloquent narrative, recorded in voiceover, and continually shifting to pertinent and incisive quotations, in different voices and by date, from people of the time: Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, other members of the party.

Taken by itself, the narrative is an exciting and accurate picture of historical instruction. The excitement is even enhanced by the pictorial accompaniment as well as, even more surprisingly, by the explanatory commentaries from a large battery of talking heads, who bring more life to the screen than historical artifacts and scenic vistas can. They are a motley group of geographers, historians, writers and poets. All in all it is fair to say that the talking heads (including Ken Burns's) save the show. None of them has very much new to say about the journey but, by their obvious respect for the subject, they give direction and interpretive depth to the series that makes it much more than a recital of stages on a trip. And they are particularly good at placing the journey into the larger context of American history.

When *Lewis and Clark* went on air in November 1997, people flocked to the TV sets by the thousands. And since the film became available as a set of videocassettes, many more will have seen it. Students and schoolchildren will have viewed it with their teachers, willingly or not, and they will have worked through the follow-up teaching material provided by PBS, America's Public Broadcasting System. Thus it is a safe bet that many more people would watch the film, do classroom exercises, than will make their way through any selection from the journals in print. But what do people get from viewing filmed pictures and paintings held together by the voice-over narrative of a journey? For one thing they get a sense of closeness to the members of the expedition that cannot be conveyed on the printed page alone. The journals can be read for what they have to say, but in the film they are there in the same capacity as the rifle Lewis used or the coat Clark slept in, the inkwell the two captains used to dip their pens in, or the American flag that we get to see on so many occasions. The voices provide the minimum of story needed to set the mood; the cultural artifacts are there to be experienced as relics of the expedition.

It is easy to scoff at such an experience, but to do so is to miss something that many academics have been missing ever since they became academics. For professional scholars as such the relics may have little to offer. If they care enough about the subject to watch the film, they already know more about the expedition and the time than the film can tell them. But if a film works, as this one does, it will induce something not expressed in words, something that imparts consciousness of the past at a level that is not merely sentimental but not simply intellectual either. The cumulative effect of watching the film is to sense, however remotely, the presence of the members of the Corps of Discovery, which is a presence in the national consciousness. Viewers can thus pay tribute to the men who stand for a lot that their country ideally represents, especially at a time when values such as love of country or respect for one's elders seem to have fled almost every level of American society. They will also learn more about the men behind the familiar figureheads. And they will come for vicarious experience of a better time. But what will make that experience accessible and draw people to it in larger numbers is a carefully crafted design that makes the film a work of art in itself, to be

experienced as such.

Even so, any analysis of the Corps of Discovery's transcontinental journey that seeks to theorize its enduring significance within American history and culture, must be interested in how notions of "empire" and "nation" are implicated in narratives from and about the Lewis and Clark journey. Even Ambrose says, in the second part of the four-hour film, that the peace medals which Lewis gave out and which had Jefferson on one side and two hands shaking on the other, were really "calling cards of empire." It is difficult to see a critical stance in what Ambrose says here, especially in the light of his statement, made without irony or self-doubt, that Lewis and Clark had "conquered the continent." Or in the light of the filmmakers' habit of referring to "firsts." As John Logan Allen points out, Neil Armstrong was the first man on the moon. By the same token, Lewis and Clark emerge as the first to go from coast to coast and see the vastnesses of the West. "But the first what?," Patricia Limerick asks, justly I think. It was easy for the two captains, who were, in their own words, "the first civilized men." Since their time, however, there has been considerable debate over what constitutes civilization and, concomitantly, acknowledgment of the presence of American Indians before the arrival of whites. Burns's solution clearly is in nationalizing the concept of "first." Accordingly, the Corps of Discovery is described in terms of "the first United States citizens to experience the Great Plains," "the first to celebrate the Fourth of July west of the Mississippi," "the first American citizens to see the daunting peaks of the Rocky mountains," and, finally, "the first of their nation to reach the Pacific Ocean by land."

When the Corps of Discovery reached the Pacific in November, 1805, they had come some 4,162 miles since leaving the Mississippi. On November 24, the captains called everyone together. A decision was needed for a site for the expedition's winter quarters. As military commanders, Lewis and Clark could have simply imposed their own choice. Instead, one by one, the name of each member of the Corps of Discovery was called out. And each one's preference was recorded. And everyone, including York and Sacagawea, Clark's black slave and the Shoshone Indian girl who served as guide and interpreter, voted in that "quintessential American moment," as Duncan calls it. According to Duncan, that moment was "Lewis and Clark at their best, which was America at its best." In point of fact, the only extant record of the historic "vote" is a crude table in William Clark's field notes. On it the preferences of the expedition's members are listed but no comment whatsoever is made. And there is nothing at all by Meriwether Lewis, who had been silent since September 22, somewhere on the Clearwater River in present-day Idaho, and who would not produce any record until November 29, that is, until *after* the event in question. As regards York, his name appears at the bottom of Clark's table; Sacagawea's name is outside of it altogether. "Janey," Clark had written, "in favor of a place where there is plenty of Potas."(Moulton 84)¹

In Burns's *Lewis and Clark*, the Corps of Discovery is made out as "the incarnation of America." The film is framed by that idea. The ending circles back to the beginning in more than one way, in what is said as well as in the use of the identical river scene and, finally, in the use of music. Presented in this way, Lewis and Clark, as individuals and as historical actors, offer to help Americans see who and what they are as they were peeking into the next thousand

1. "Janey" was Sacagawea's nickname. I do not know the meaning of the word "pota," though. Gary Moulton's only comment on this episode is that it is "worth noting that [both] voted" (*ibid.* 86).

years. "We as a people are starved for self-definition," Ken Burns told *USA Today*. "And history is medicine. It has nothing to do with the past. It has everything to do with the present." There is nothing inherently wrong in this kind of thinking, which in any case is basic to any community. It brings me back, though, to Burns's critics, many of whom have their political roots in various radical movements of the 1960s and who by now have ensconced themselves in the academies; clearly those critics have use neither for epic heroes (which they may think of as unfitting to the American ideals of liberty and democracy) nor for fathers (whose frequent silences they tend to read as the expression of an authoritarian character). Ken Burns belongs to a different generation, both demographically and ideologically. Late among the baby-boomers, he has no problem bringing together New Western Historians with Stephen E. Ambrose or, even, with Ronald Reagan. Yet what sets *Lewis and Clark* off from most other patriotic filmic productions of the more recent past that I am aware of, is the fact that in the case of Burns, the signifier is not a war. War is a signifier in all the films about Vietnam, as well as in *Independence Day* (a future war), in *Saving Private Ryan* (World War Two), and in *The Patriot* (the War of American Independence). Nor is conquest, as is the case in *How the West Was Won*.

Burns's series is actually patterned on that quintessentially American genre of the jeremiad, which typically calls to account the backsliders, i.e., those who have swerved from the right path (see Bercovitch). The rhetoric of the jeremiad can be found in from Gerard Baker's, a Mandan-Hidatsa's, reference to the Lewis and Clark expedition as "the-beginning of an end." The same theme is echoed in William Least Heat-Moon's reminder that "Lewis and Clark went as students; they came back as teachers, and," Heat-Moon laments, "we failed to learn the lessons they had learned." The landscape and riverscape scenes, too — shot at dawn, with mist over the water and a huge sun rising, the Great Plains with their herds of buffalo, deer, and elk, and with plenty of fruits and grapes — serve to convey a sense of what Americans are about to lose. Or have already lost. "This was paradise," Stephen Ambrose is heard over a backdrop of melancholy music. What this means is nothing less than that the dreams of Lewis and Clark (and of Jefferson) had been just, but that posterity had swerved from the right path. Indeed the script includes the story of the Indian chiefs visiting Jefferson, complaining that the President did not exert the control they would expect a chief to exert; and we likewise learn that William Clark did not get elected governor of the Northern Louisiana Territory because he was considered a softy.

The film does not end on this negative note, though. On the contrary, in its conclusion, titled "Done for Posterity" and taking up the final ten minutes of the documentary, there is what may be described as a Great Falls of nationalism. Put into the right mood by the same river scene and the same music as at the beginning of the film, as well as by images of homesteaders and railroads, we are told by the film's narrator, Hal Holbrook, that Jefferson had reckoned it would take Americans a hundred generations to fill up the land Lewis and Clark explored, while Americans did it in less than five. Also in the conclusion, William Least Heat-Moon describes the Lewis and Clark expedition as a "gift" to the nation. They discovered nothing less than that "America was even more than Thomas Jefferson could dream that it could be." For this reason alone, John Logan Allen, a professor of geography, suggests, the story of Lewis and Clark is "an American story." And Stephen Ambrose adds that the story provides Americans "with a sense of national unity that transcends time [...] and brings us together from coast to coast." Dayton Duncan comes in, too, pointing out that what Lewis and Clark had discovered was nothing less than "the American future." And, by a piece of rather awkward logic (and to a backdrop of keelboat-with-flag), Duncan argues that the expedition

literally were "*E pluribus Unum.*"

The "usable past" of *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Voyage of Discovery* is, then, the film's ineluctable consequence, its underlying logic. And the film is a most appropriate barometer both of late twentieth-century Lewis and Clark points of view and of the nation's most deeply felt needs. We may say, therefore, that the primary function of the documentary is to reconcile through reconstruction. For Burns at any rate, "America" is not at all the primary symbol of what is grotesque, deadening, and oppressive. On the contrary, bent as he is on "reconstructing" America, on reaffirming confidence in America's basic principles and values, its foundational myths and symbols, and its aspirations toward hegemony, he has manufactured, with his documentary, an imaginary national consensus with Lewis and Clark as its signifiers. In doing so, the very notion of history is — at least in part — eradicated, but this is the price tag for, to borrow from psychologists Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, a "preferred reality."

In a book called *Rethinking History*, Keith Jenkins argues that interpretations of the past are generally "aligned to the dominant discursive practices" (66). It may be useful to keep this in mind when we ask the question what PBS, America's Public Broadcasting System, was up to in putting on air a production like Ken Burns's *Lewis and Clark*. This question becomes even more pressing in light of the fact that activities of this kind bypass the academy to reach a wider constituency. Especially Burns's history films have been evolving almost as a new genre of communication, whose design and purpose has not been not quite defined or articulated clearly enough. To be sure, *Lewis and Clark* needs to be experienced differently, not the way one would experience a book. It is ready to be consumed in one go, or in two at the most. One does not go to follow up other references; nor close it, to be picked up later. A film like this has to assume people, its design helping to convey an educational message at the same time as it helps the film become an experience that is not wholly didactic, something to be enjoyed sensually, perhaps even spiritually.

A caveat may be in order here: the interpretation embodied in a TV documentary need not necessarily be considered as carrying the endorsement of the institution airing it, any more than the interpretation offered as a subject by a university professor is so considered. But in the case of TV programs, including PBS programs, these have been identified closely with their sponsors, and TV networks expect such identification as a way of winning and keeping public recognition and support. In order to be able to calculate financial risk, new projects are seldom undertaken without outside assistance from foundations, corporations, government's agencies, and private donors. To offend by presenting a too unpopular or too controversial slant on a familiar figure or topic could defeat the purpose. Hence a kind of self-censorships places limits on a filmmaker; and outside pressures from interested parties are more threatening than they would be at a university, where a book (or even a film) might claim a share in accepted principles of academic freedom.

The controversy over the 1991 Smithsonian exhibition on the *The West as America* is telling. As John Fiske, in his excellent discussion of the exhibition and its contestation for American history recounts, not only did the project have its planned visits to Denver and St. Louis canceled; also some of its wall texts were revised, so as to make them, in the words of Robert McC. Adams, the Smithsonian Institution secretary, "less strident in their condemnation of Western expansion" (175). Among those who had been most fiercely critical was Daniel Boorstin, a former Librarian of Congress who once excused lies about the Vietnam War as "patriotic necessities," and who in 1953 named five of his former colleagues to the House Un-American Activities Committee. Boorstin's vituperative comment in the exhibition's guest

book alerted Ted Stevens, the Republican Senator from Alaska, who subsequently denounced the exhibition in the U.S. Senate. Senator Stevens had on a previous occasion criticized the Smithsonian for screening the documentary *Black Tide* about Exxon's role in the Alaska oil spill. It should also be added that as a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Stevens was always in a position to directly control the Smithsonian's federal funding. Which he apparently never doubted he should not do. On the contrary, Stevens introduced into the Congressional Record an editorial which argued that those "who control the culture determine how Americans perceive themselves and how they set the course for the future" (167-69).

The Smithsonian exhibition is nothing more than a single-case argument here. Yet the institution's efforts to introduce cultural diversity have been constantly contradicted, "structurally by its architecture, and geographically by its location in the Washington Mall, that heartland of government and culture where white power plays with uncontradicted self-assurance" (170). As regards PBS, from its inception by an act of Congress in 1967, it has been under the influence of money and politics and thus never became what the "Great Society"-inspired Carnegie Commission on Educational Television had hoped for in its report of the same year. According to the *Carnegie Commission on Educational Television*, PBS was to become a system that would include "all that is of human interest and importance that is not at the moment appropriate or available for support by advertising [and] a voice for groups in the community that may otherwise be unheard" (26).

In attempting to fulfill the terms of PBS's mandate, there have been many programs which would have made the Commission proud — *Frontline*, for instance, or the *P.O.V.* (for *Point of View*) summer series of independent films — but if we are to trust John Leonard and other critics, mostly the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 has proved *disabling* rather than *enabling*. One reason for PBS's problems seems that the original idea of funding it through an excise tax on television sets was scrapped. But there appear to be other reasons, too, for PBS to develop into what often appears as an unseemly mimicry of commercial networks, and a culture of increasing accommodation to the entertainment industry, partisan politics, sectarian pressure groups, and the military-industrial-bureaucratic complex. Especially grievous must have been all kinds of meddling: by the White House, any White House, whose policy advisers or spin doctors apparently have only one job, i.e., to make their president, whoever he is, and his behavior, whatever it is, look good. As regards the chief executives, Ronald Reagan at first tried to ruthlessly cut financial appropriations; failing that, he exerted his influence through Pat Buchanan, who tirelessly helped vet appointees to the nine-member-strong Corporation for Public Broadcasting Board. Other group pressure is customarily exerted by Congress, most of whose members, when thinking about reelection, become increasingly disinclined to spend tax dollars on bad-news programs about corporate accountability, domestic violence, declining cities, poverty, racial strife, or indeterminate sexuality.

According to Leonard, one tangible result of all this political meddling has been that federal funding fell from 86 percent of public broadcasting's total revenue in 1980 to a mere 16 percent in 1995, or \$312 million, or \$1.09 per citizen per year (as opposed to \$38 spent in Great Britain). Bad enough as this had been, in September 1998, and instigated by Representative Newt Gingrich, PBS was again facing major cutbacks in public funding, even though a January 1995 CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll indicated that 76% of Americans wish to keep funding for PBS, third only to national defense and law enforcement as the most valuable

programs for federal funding.²

Is this what caused public TV in the U.S. to be in bed with corporate America, with the petroleum industry as well as with the Department of Defense and its subcontractors? It is difficult to make any statement regarding cause and effect. At any rate, notable examples are Gulf Oil sponsoring *National Geographic* (presumably to help viewers forget just who polluted the environment in the first place), Kellogg and Nestlé paying for the *Eat Smart* program on the American diet, or Oreos and Fig Newtons underwriting *Childhood*. It is also worth noting that during the fifteen-year period between 1980 - 1995, corporate funding increased by 50 percent, to 27 percent of national program costs. Especially in light of media-bashing from Congress (which so noticeably shifted to "left-dominated, elitist, minority-radical" public television), this generosity may not always stem from a desire to foster diverse speech, or even purposeful action; according to James Ledbetter, media critic for *The Village Voice*, the sole purpose is "reputation laundering," or what sociologist M. David Erdman calls "milieu control," and what Peter Spina, Mobil Oil's general manager of corporate relations, calls "the halo effect." As Herb Schmertz, Mobil Oil's Vice President, explained, "cultural excellence generally suggests corporate excellence" (Leonard). By which Schmertz may have meant that underwritten tax-deductible credits for *Masterpiece Theater* would sell more gas to an upscale audience eager for culture to pop through holes in their heads. Just as, in our case, financially underwritten by General Motors, it may mean to sell more vehicles to an equally upscale audience eager to drive out West and visit the sites along the Lewis and Clark Trail.

Ken Burns's *Lewis and Clark* has the appeal and power that books alone can seldom reach. For that reason alone, some tough questions *should* be asked. What a well-designed film (and package) can present in a rather short time has to be not only informative but interpretive, and the interpretation comes with the authority of the material so artfully arranged. Documentary filmmakers, like historians, strive for objectivity, but they have to select and simplify far more drastically than in a book, and the resulting subjectivity is obscured by the authenticity of the objects and the lure of the design in which they have been placed. It is precisely because a documentary film's interpretation thus pronounced carries such power that it can provoke surprisingly violent protests from those who find it unfair that they cannot present a conflicting interpretation with similar authority. The thesis of a book can be answered with another book, but how do you answer a documentary film?

It is because documentary films like Burns's are so unanswerable in kind that the ideological hostility they arouse is perhaps understandable. No filmmaker wishes to have his or her interpretation or a film's design dictated by partisan critics or to make it so bland that nobody cares. The past, especially America's past, is full of episodes that invite partisan passion. Burns has evidently tried to escape it by integrating both an African American man, Clark's slave York, and a Native American woman, Sacagawea, the Bird Woman. And by enlisting, as commentators, Gerard Baker, a Hidatse, and Erica Funkhouser, a woman poet. But also on the list of commentators is Stephen E. Ambrose, World War Two historian and adviser to Steven Spielberg's film *Saving Private Ryan*. Nor is it a secret that Burns is a wholly owned subsidiary of General Motors. Or, for that matter, that Thomas Jefferson, the Civil War, Baseball, and the Lewis and Clark expedition are hardly candidates for stepping on any

2. From a petition passed around the Internet: signers were asked to forward a copy to wein2688@blue.univnorthco.edu.

corporate toes.

While the copyrights for *Lewis and Clark* are held by The American Lives Film Project, and Turner Home Entertainment (for the Artwork), credits for making possible the production of the film go to “General Motors Corporation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Public Broadcasting System, The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, William T. Kemper Foundation, and the People of the State of Montana.” But corporate sponsoring, surprisingly, seems to be a minor problem in comparison with PBS itself, that “monumental mystification,” as John Leonard has called it. Indeed, PBS seems to have been governed by its own rules and laws, which if we are to believe two recent books on the subject, are mostly those of anticipatory avoidance and timidity (Ledbetter and Bullert). This means that it is the system itself and its managers which usually have the worst suspicions about any program so that ultimately what matters is less what gets on PBS than what does not.

Neither direct interferences nor anticipatory avoidance or timidity are likely to go away any time soon. Unless, as Ben Agger seems to believe, reception leads to cultural production in its own right, by which is meant that consumers become “watchers-watching-themselves watch” (8). Or else, until we have regained what Fredric Jameson calls “our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way” (21). That possibility, Jameson argues (48), was lost when as a result of the logic of late capitalism the cultural realm was destroyed, was replaced by the new global space of postmodernism. It is nevertheless necessary to theorize this space if we are to regain the original semi-autonomy of culture, its utopian potential. Jameson’s proposal (51) is to reclaim the didactic, and thus to initiate a process of “cognitive mapping” which specifically involves “the practical reconquest of a sense of place and time and the reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and re-map along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories.” Cognitive mapping, the hope is, would “enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” (51).

In pursuance of a Jamesonian process of cognitive mapping we would, in the long run, be able to map our individual social relationship to local, national, and international class realities. So far so good. But both Agger’s and Jameson’s is a rather monocular view, burningly focused on a politics exclusive of culture. Such a view is oblivious to the fact that many viewers seek options that please as well as edify. Such as, *inter alia*, Ken Burns’s series about the Lewis and Clark expedition, together with its companion book. “I devoured the book in a five-hour plane ride and thoroughly enjoyed myself,” a customer reviewer from Monrovia, CA, commented, “I am sure that it is not a comprehensive description of all that is known about Lewis and Clark, but it was brief enough to keep a casually interested reader involved and thorough enough to provide some real richness and color to the story and to intrigue me enough to plan a visit to some sites along the trail.”³ In allowing *Lewis and Clark*, the film, to appear on PBS, its executive producers, their minds always set on corporate sponsors, seem to have realized the film’s potential to at one and the same time delight and instruct. I hope that this Horatian dictum can also be said about my own product.

3. <<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ISBN=067954500/6675-5419517-794401>>. The comment is dated December 12, 1997.

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